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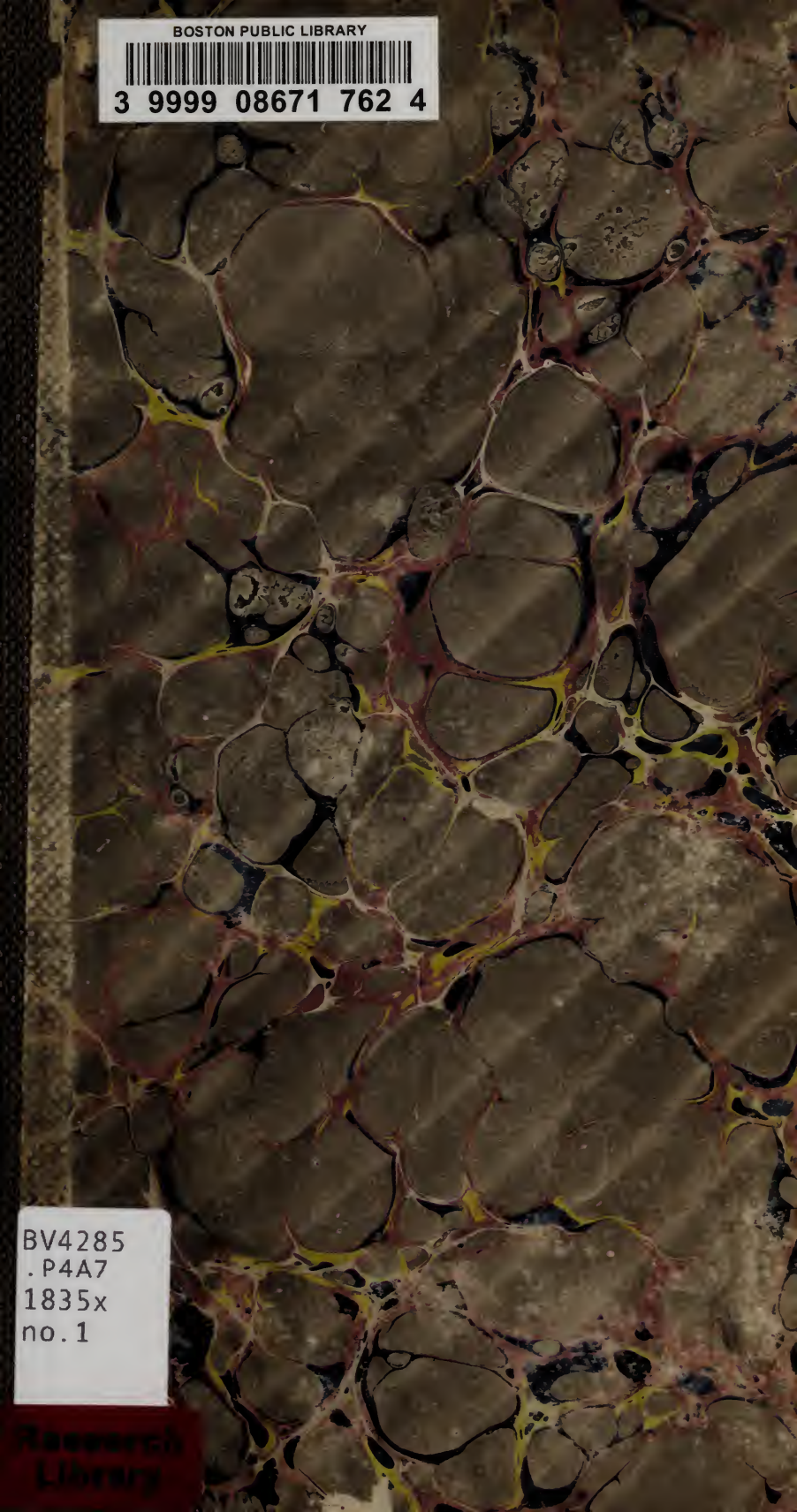

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THE TRIUMPHS OF WAR.

A

SERMON

PREACHED

ON THE DAY OF THE ANNUAL FAST,

APRIL 15, 1847,

BY ANDREW P. PEABODY,

PASTOR OF THE SOUTH CHURCH, PORTSMOUTH, N. H.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

PORTSMOUTH: JOHN W. FOSTER.

C. W. BREWSTER, PRINTER.

1847.

SERMON.

ACTS X. 36.

Preaching peace by Jesus Christ.

The day before yesterday a peal of rejoicing for the taking of Vera Cruz was rung forth from most of the church steeples in town. In employing for the expression of their gladness the furniture and property of our churches, the friends of the war now in progress have themselves violated the neutrality, which they have endeavored to impose on the voices of the sanctuary. They have forced into their service tones hallowed by the most sacred associations with the worship of the living, and the last rites of loving piety over the departed. They have thus taken their injunction of silence from the house of worship, and in making its inanimate, though most eloquent music echo their peculiar sentiments, they have, I trust, (if in any instance that work remained to be done,) unsealed, for Christian utterances on the great questions at issue, the living voices of all that minister at the altar. I am sincerely thankful that

our bell bore no part in that concert. But, as the conduct of our Wardens in refusing to have it used for such a purpose may be called in question, I propose now to vindicate it, and to offer some of the reasons which justify the expressive silence of our belfry while the surrounding steeples rang with joy.

In the first place, in our professed regard, our most precious article of church furniture is a volume here at my side, which bears the same relation to our rites of worship, which the image or oracle did to the temple service of the ancient heathen, and the ark with the overshadowing cherubim to that of the Jews. This book is literally our oracle. We come hither on the day which it pronounces sacred; we offer our prayers and praises to the Father whom it reveals, through the Mediator whom it presents to our faith; and all else that we profess to do here is to study its lessons of truth and duty. This book has various contents, that have come down to us through a long series of ages, and it purports to give us a compend of God's special revelations of his will and law for the guidance of successive generations of men. Its history carries us through centuries of violence, wrong and blood; but we find them all spanned by the promise of a heaven-born King, under whose sceptre wars should cease, the sword be broken into the ploughshare, and the spear into the pruning hook. We have the record of the coming of that King, and of the song of angels on his birthnight, proclaiming, "on earth peace, and good will among men." We

find abundant reason to believe that it was his prime aim and end in living and dying, to interweave all kindreds of men by the most sacred bonds of brotherhood, and to quench forever those lusts and passions, which alone lift the arm of violence and light the flame of war. That his aim has not been reached,—that his end is far from its fulfilment,—the recent victory gives us only too signal a token. And that this is the case many rejoice, and have a perfect right to seek out all lawful modes of expressing their joy. But it is certainly in utter violation of decorum and consistency that voices from our church-towers should bear part in this joy, and ring in gladness that the Gospel is not yet supreme,—that Christ does not yet reign,—that the earth is still reddened by the passions which he came to subdue,—that our oracle falls so far short of the fulfilment of its predictions. In self-consistency we must put our Bible out of our church doors, and establish some other rule and form of worship than the Christian, before we lend any of the agencies of our sacred edifice to express joy on occasions on which the Bible would bid us mourn.

Again, the Mexicans are called our enemies. They probably are so. We have done enough to make them so; and for them to be otherwise, they must have a double share of the spirit of Christ. Now the religion, to which our church is consecrated, prescribes certain modes of dealing with enemies. Its precepts are: "If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink,"—"Love your enemies;

do good to them that hate you,"—"Overcome evil with good." Had the Mexicans done us wrong, and had a Christian army crossed their frontiers to minister to their necessities, to proffer them on our behalf fraternal relations and offices, and to diffuse among them the benefits of that higher civilization and purer moral culture to which we lay claim, the progress of that army would have been conquering and to conquer, and we, with bell and organ, shout and anthem, would have made these walls shake and ring for the victory. Heaven grant that they may stand long enough to echo with such bloodless triumphs, which are yet in reserve for coming years. But which of these Christian laws for the treatment of enemies has not been atrociously violated in the recent siege? Far other voices than those of love rent the walls and ran through the streets of the beleaguered city. The most appalling necessities, the most deadly sufferings on the part of the besieged, were made the point of support and ground of confidence for the assailants. Not one note of mercy, not one breathing of compassion, tempers the official narrative of that bloody transaction, or relieves the unmingled sadness, and the unqualified reprobation, with which it must be regarded by every Christian heart. We have made that nation our bitter enemies; and the most rancorous hatred of men or fiends can invent no more fearful agony than that in which, within the last few months, we have consigned thousands upon thousands to a speedier or

more lingering death, and steeped thousands of bereaved and desolate families. If then there be anywhere a temple dedicated to the creed "of them of old time," by whom it was said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy," there is a bell which may fittingly swing in response to the boom of the rejoicing cannon. But when the express laws of Christ have been in letter and in spirit utterly set at nought, a mournful silence becomes the Christian sanctuary.

Again, the Bible establishes a law of impartial justice,—of sacred respect for the rights and property of all men. Even in its early and imperfect revelations, it was said, "Thou shalt not steal," and "Cursed be he that removeth his neighbor's landmark;" and none can doubt that the Gospel prescribes the most rigid and conscientious equity in every relation and transaction. Now what shadow of right have we even to the peaceful occupancy of the soil which we have deluged with the blood of its owners? Does any pretended landmark of ours reach to the lines of our army, or approach within gunshot of the walls of Vera Cruz? Have our citizens any more rights of property there, than Santa Anna and his army within our fields or walls? It is said, indeed that war suspends all common maxims of right and justice. I know that it does. But I look in vain to the New Testament for the charter of such a suspension. The code of war is independent of that of Christ. The broadest construction of his teachings

leaves no provision open for a state of voluntary hostility, and those who aid in bringing about such a state, are morally responsible for every violation of private rights, and every outrage on private property, to which it may lead. So far as the written word of God goes, the midnight burglar or assassin within my doors, and the invading army battering down the walls of the Mexican city, occupy the same moral position, and incur the same fearful accountability. The victory which we refused to help celebrate, was won in a conflict which no one has yet been daring enough to defend on moral grounds. It was a victory of force over right,—of human passion over the law of Christ; and it would have been high treason against our holy faith, to have lent any portion of the apparatus of our Christian worship to proclaim the triumph of anti-Christian principles.

Yet once more, our church is consecrated to a humane and merciful religion. Its founder lifted off men's burdens, and helped their infirmities. Beneath his touch, bread grew in the desert for the famished multitude, and living pulses beat in the palsied frame. Wherever he went, health and gladness flowed from his lips, and sprang upon his footsteps. He bade his followers show mercy as they would receive mercy; taught them in the parable of the Samaritan that humanity was independent of national distinctions; and, in his sketch of the final judgment, made works of love for the relief of the needy, the stranger and the prisoner, the test of dis-

cipleship requisite for a place at his right hand. In the same spirit, one of his three most intimate associates assigns to the visiting of the fatherless and the widows in their affliction, the first place among the marks of pure and undefiled religion. Now it was for works of a character diametrically opposed to the tender and loving spirit of Christ and his Gospel, that we heard those notes of rejoicing. I pity, from the bottom of my heart, the man who can have so much as a momentary feeling of exultation at such horrors. What! rejoice at the explosion of those infernal missiles in those late peaceful homes,—at the scattering of the dissevered limbs and mangled corpses of those hundreds of women and children? Imagine the scene enacted among us. Suppose our whole population surrounded by the enginery of war,—our wives and children forbidden all egress,—witnessing day after day spectacles of the intensest agony, at the very thought of which the blood runs cold,—burrowing in our cellars, while the shell bursts through roof, ceiling and floor, explodes on the ground, and wraps the torn and bleeding forms of matron and maiden, boy and babe, in a winding-sheet of smoke and flame. The groan of the wounded, the wild skriek of the dying, rises from house to house above the roar of the artillery. Dwelling after dwelling buries in its shattered ruins the dismembered and the dead, while survivors suffer a thousand times the pangs of death in the lacerating of every fibre of their being. Were this measure meted to us, could we conceive of its

giving joy anywhere this side of pandemonium? Those Mexicans have human hearts. There are there as here fond parents and loving children. They have the same susceptibilities of suffering and anguish with ourselves. Sudden calamity is no less appalling, the cup of bereavement no less bitter, the sense of desolation in the widows or the orphan's heart no less keen, to them, than to us. The frightful realities, through which the dead have passed into eternity, and surviving friends have seen them go, exceed the power of language, and leave imagination far behind experience. And for works and scenes like these, shall there be rejoicing, and that, too, echoed from the temples of the meek, compassionate, loving Redeemer? These are the very works which Jesus came to destroy; and, had any sound of sympathy with them gone forth from our house of prayer, we should have reason to feel that it had utterly lost its consecration, and was no longer a fit place for the gathering of a Christian assembly.

But it is said, perhaps, that the rejoicing was not for the horrible havoc of the siege, but for the display of the noblest traits of character on the part of our troops and their leaders. Be it so. In order to render it meet that our churches should participate in the outward demonstrations of joy, the characters manifested in the siege and illustrated in the victory must belong to the Christian school,—the virtues brought into exercise in the conflict must be such as have received our Divine Master's approval. Now, though

I believe war under all circumstances inconsistent with the precepts, and opposed to the spirit of the Gospel, I by no means deny that there may be many noble Christian traits beneath the "garments rolled in blood." Where one repels assault from his own home, or helps roll back the tide of invasion from his own shores, even though his conscience be not fully enlightened as to the extent to which a Christian is bound to suffer wrong without doing wrong, he may still manifest some of the loftiest attributes of character,—he may have a keen sense of justice, may love mercy, and may be filled with that spirit of generous, disinterested self-sacrifice, which, with greater light, would have made him an unresisting martyr for truth and righteousness. There was much of this martyr spirit among the leaders in the American Revolution; and I honor them for it, and believe that they were true to their highest convictions of duty. But virtues of this class have no foothold in an assailing army, in an openly aggressive war. We are told that the leaders in this war believe it unjust and wrong. If this be the case, they must regard the successive outrages to which they have lent their services, as unmitigated robbery and murder; and to do this work they have sold themselves, body and soul.

I know that the prevalent theory is,—"The soldier has no right to look behind his country's orders,—it is no concern of his whether his country's wars be right or wrong," that is, he is not a moral agent,—he

has ceased to be personally accountable. This might be a safe theory, were human authority competent to establish it. But unfortunately the very idea of accountability implies a higher party. When the individual soul stands before the divine tribunal, stained with the wanton butchery of those women and babes, think you that the plea, "I knew that it was wrong and vile, but my country bade me do it," will be accepted in heaven's chancery in mitigation of the crime? We praise the man, in high executive or legislative trust, who resigns his office, rather than violate his own conviction of duty at the bidding of the Chief Magistrate or of his constituents. Why should not the conscientious soldier do the same, so that a government, intent on some scheme of lawless aggression, might know beforehand, that it could employ for such work only the refuse of its forces? Is it said that such a doctrine would undermine the military profession? I answer, that, if the tenure of the military profession requires a man to perform acts of the most decisive and momentous moral significance, yet forbids him to consult his own conscience as to their moral bearing, and at the same time provides him with no release under the divine signature from the responsibility for individual acts which rests upon other men, it is a profession which cannot bear the light of Christianity. I say not that the profession can rest on no other tenure, but would commend this as a subject of serious inquiry for the friends and advocates of war. And I would still urge

the question,—Is there, in the precepts or the spirit of Christ, any warrant or pretence for obeying man rather than God,—for trampling on every divine law and every human charity, and wading through seas of guilt at the bidding of corrupt rulers? This at any rate is not Christian virtue,—not a style of moral excellence to be praised in or from the sanctuary. This sacrifice of individual conscience is no offering for the altar of Christian faith. Those who first bore the Saviour's name, while they offered up everything else for Christ's sake, proclaimed, "We must obey God rather than man," in the very ears of those who occupied high places of power, and at the peril of their lives.

We cannot then regard the blind, unquestioning obedience to Government at the sacrifice of individual conscience, without which our fleet and army would never have laid siege to Vera Cruz, as entitled to a place among the Christian virtues. And for which among the shining sisterhood did that transaction afford scope? Under which of the beatitudes shall we canonize the heroes of that massacre? Surely meekness, humility, forbearance, long-suffering, can have had no home in the hearts of the assailants; and these are the cardinal virtues of the gospel. The moral system of Christ beautifully verified the prediction: "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low." He deranged the entire moral scale, and transposed its very extremes. He found the military

virtues, aggressive courage, quick resentment, bigoted patriotism, unyielding obstinacy, at the summit of the scale. He cast them down, and cast them out; and for courage he put fortitude,—for resentment, forgiveness,—for exclusive patriotism, an all embracing philanthropy,—for harsh, unfeeling rigidness of purpose, a love incapable of weariness or exhaustion. For any signal victory, in which these virtues of the gospel and the cross bear the most prominent part, let every voice that the sanctuary can lend join in the triumph; but not for a victory over these virtues,—not for the disowning and overturning of the Christian scale,—not for transactions, which carry us back to the days of heathenism, and make us feel as if the sun of righteousness were setting in blood.

Such were some of the reasons why no merry peal rang from our church-tower on the news of the victory. That bell has deep notes of grief, which it might most fittingly have sent forth. On that same afternoon, for the death of a single child, we heard the slow, sad knell from a neighboring steeple. Had our bells all been tolled for the dead at Vera Cruz, they would have chimed with many hearts that were filled with sadness at the tidings, and would have been a not unapt expression of the contrite sorrow with which, under so heavy a load of guilt, the great heart of the nation should humble itself before its forsaken God. Were we to embody right Christian feeling in our outward forms of worship, our churches would be clothed in mourning, the

funeral toll would summon us to the sanctuary, our anthems would all be dirges, our praise would lose itself in penitential sorrow, until this atrocious war shall cease, and its memory shall be bathed throughout the land in floods of devout contrition.

I have thus far spoken of the proprieties of the temple made with hands. The order of the sanctuary, the outward beauty of holiness, is, however, but the type of that temple, whose builder and maker is God. "The temple of God is holy, which temple ye are." If it be sacrilege to testify unholy joy for deeds of blood and rapine by soulless sounds from the house of prayer, how much more so is it to harbor thoughts of such joy in our hearts! Of the warning against this there is more need than a few weeks ago I was willing to believe. While the fortune of the war hung in doubt, there were indeed many ready to denounce it; and one of the great political parties, though lacking courage, (with a few illustrious exceptions,) to maintain a firm and decided stand against it, still proffered many strong expressions of disapproval and abhorrence. But now that success has crowned our arms, we find many members and some distinguished leaders of that party joining in the congratulations and festivities that hail the recent victories; thus showing how flexible the conscience of a political partizan is made by the current maxims of expediency and availability. There are strong indications that this war in its triumphant progress is going to become generally pop-

ular; and that, through its shout and din, one of its laurelled heroes is to be elevated to the chief chair of state. I can hardly imagine an event more fatal than this would be to the peace, and ultimately to the liberties, of the nation. Should it once be established by so signal a precedent that military renown, achieved in warfare however atrocious, affords the surest and quickest passage to the first places at the nation's disposal, we have nothing in prospect but wars and rumors of wars for generations to come; and every new swarm of aspirants for public favor will work their way to power and office by fomenting discord and stirring up the waters of strife. All this you and I may be unable to prevent, though none can tell how fast or far any earnest expression of dissent from the multitude on moral and religious grounds might spread. There certainly exists, in our country, with all the prevalent apathy and time-serving, enough of Christian principle and sentiment to make itself strongly felt, would it only in some one quarter take to itself resolute, determined utterance. The pulpit, the press where uncorrupted, the individual voice and influence of men who love the right better than their party, might yet achieve the salvation of our country from a destiny, which, after tossing her on seas of blood, will inevitably merge the last vestige of republican freedom in anarchy or military despotism. But, whether we can effect much or little, we can at least be true to our own consciences. We can keep ourselves innocent from the

great transgression, and deliver our own souls from blood-guiltiness. We can help our children, our neighbors, our friends, in the formation of right principles and sentiments. We can prepare ourselves to pass, with clean hands and pure hearts, from a land filled with violence to the welcome tribunal of Jesus, and the peaceful seats of the redeemed.

I know that such sentiments as I have now uttered are deemed unpatriotic. I see it currently said in our most respectable public journals, that, whatever may be thought of the justice of this war, every citizen of the United States must needs rejoice at the brilliant success and honor that have attended our arms. I for one feel no such joy, but only deep sorrow, shame and humiliation, the deeper for every victory. Yet I believe that I love my country none the less for this. In my view, success in crime, adroitness in wrong doing, whether in an individual or a nation, confers no honor, and affords no just cause for joy. I love my children; and, because I love them, if they entered on any wrong course of conduct, I should hope that they would fail of their evil ends, and be humbled and made better by the failure. And I have all along hoped, till it is now too late for the hope, that our country might fail of every end sought by this conflict, and might, though the mortification of those lusts and passions whence it sprang, be made wiser and better. I cannot but believe that Providence, in permitting this guilty success for a season, is preparing for us sorer judgments

and a heavier doom. The justice of an outraged Heaven makes me tremble for my country. I can take no hopeful view of the nearer future; nor do I believe that we shall any of us live long enough to see the time, when we can again congratulate ourselves, as we have been wont to do, that we were born citizens of these United States. By the threatened triumph of the war spirit, and the political profligacy which must follow in its train, our goodly heritage is to my eye hopelessly laid waste, and the sanctuary of our true peace and well-being made utterly desolate.

Think not, that because I have thus freely expressed my abhorrence of this war, I have no sympathy with those, who have been made its agents. As to the members of our naval and military establishments, while, (as I have said,) I believe that they will find it hard to make good their plea before a higher tribunal, "let him that is without sin cast the first stone." I leave all harsh and reproachful censure for those, (if any there be,) who have never failed in the moral courage requisite for the surrender of all personal considerations at the call of duty. Were these officers to make the sacrifice, which high Christian principle undoubtedly demands of them, it would be an illustrious sacrifice, worthy of the best days of the primitive church. Their profession should not be made a mark for peculiar attack or condemnation. It is but the exponent and representative of a still imperfectly christianized condition of

the body politic. It will exist and be honored, so long as nations calling themselves Christian elevate other moral standards above that of the gospel,—it will decline and vanish with the revival and establishment of primitive Christianity. In the present war, while I would not for worlds place myself in the moral position of those actively employed in its prosecution, I regard the greatest load of guilt as resting on the government, which has taken advantage of their maxims of unconditional obedience, to send them on a mission of rapine and blood, which most of them loathe and hate. I sincerely lament the havoc that has been made in their ranks, and for their sake, as well as for the country's, I long to see the plague staid.

As for those, who, unforced by what they deemed prior obligations, have thrown themselves into this conflict, I feel unutterable pity for their recklessness and inhumanity.

But, most of all, I confess, my sympathies are with the bereaved, suffering, homeless Mexicans,—with the multitudes, that, without fault of their own, have been made to feel the direst of earthly calamities, and have been given over to the wasting of the war fiend, whose tender mercies are cruelty. They are our brethren, commended to our charity and our intercessions by the blessed gospel, borne equally with ourselves on the heart of Jesus, loved no less than we are by the eternal Father. Heaven grant them speedy release from fear, surprise and agony,—space to rear again

their shattered dwellings, and to gather in quietness the remnants of their divided households. Heaven grant that they may learn better lessons than we are teaching them, and that their experience of the bitterness of strife may commend to them the arts of peace and the spirit of gentleness and mercy.

But all is not dark. We have faith in the sure word of prophecy. We doubt not that we may hasten, and our posterity behold the day, which the old Hebrew seers descried from afar through ages of guilt and woe, when men shall learn war no more. Nor are we without signs of its approach. The gospel is now, more than ever before, preached in its primitive spirit. Christians are fast learning what they had forgotten for fifteen centuries, that meekness and mercy are the disciple's only armor. Let us labor in faith and hope, by example and influence, by word and deed, to diffuse the spirit of irrespective love and universal brotherhood, and, though God call us home before the work be done, we may join the second host of herald angels, who will wake the echoes of the regenerated earth with the song, "The kingdoms of this world are becomethe kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever."